

HB0279:Support
Rania Dima
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Dear Madam Chair and Members of the Committee,

Far too often, mental health crises lead to arrests and there are more people in jail in psychosis than in our hospitals¹. Jails have become the new asylums, with no path to recovery. Our hospitals have failed not only our most-vulnerable, but the families who love them, as mine so painfully learned when my autistic son lost touch with reality. The kind-hearted, family-oriented son that I knew was replaced by someone full of anguish, rage and paranoia that a conspiracy was out to get him. He was suicidal and experiencing auditory and visual hallucinations. Little did I know then that the intersection between serious mental illness and criminalization rests on a knife's edge.

I filed for a petition for an emergency evaluation to get him help. Instead of help, a SWAT team busted down his door, pepper bombed his condo and dragged him to the hospital. Instead of keeping him, the hospital released him after the mandatory hold despite telling us that they had plenty of evidence to admit him. Because he was still in psychosis, the Sheriff's office took him to jail where he sat for the next fifteen months to await his trial, even though he had no prior criminal record. Because he was still very sick, my son refused the state's offer of Not Criminally Responsible, believing it to be a trap set by the conspiracy. As a result he sat in jail for 470 days without treatment, with his brain still on fire. He ended up accruing additional charges and came out of jail blaming me for putting him there. The judge's solution was to order him to have no contact with me or with his father, the two people in the world who are supposed to be there for him the most. He can't even contact his younger sisters, who are growing up without him. Now, we are stuck waiting for the next crisis to unfold with our hands tied.

Psychosis is a serious medical condition² as significant as a stroke or a heart attack. The longer someone is in psychosis, the more damage occurs to the brain and the less chance they have of recovering². Yet instead of medical intervention, they are criminalized. I am a disabled person. My son's brain disease is just as physical as the disease causing me to go deaf and blind. Like any disability, psychotic disorders do not simply go away by putting the person in jail, and the high numbers of those incarcerated with serious mental illness¹ reveal all too well how the system discriminates against those with brain disorders. Instead of help, they are criminalized. Instead of a path to treatment, they are shoved behind bars at significant taxpayer cost³.

If we are going to force the jails to pick up the pieces of our broken system, let's at least equip them with the tools so that our loved ones have a chance of recovery. My heart is broken, my family is broken, and the system I turned to is broken. Please support HB279.

Sincerely,

Rania Dima

1. https://www.tac.org/reports_publications/serious-mental-illness-prevalence-in-jails-and-prisons/-bars/
2. <https://www.tac.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/DUP-Research-Summary.pdf>
3. <https://www.naco.org/sites/default/files/documents/Cost%20Benefit%20Study.pdf>